

## **ABSTRACT**

Title of Dissertation: TEXTBOOK COMPOSERS: A PERFORMANCE  
STUDY OF AMERICAN MODERNISM

Josiah Stocker, Doctor of Musical Arts, 2019

Dissertation Directed By: Professor Rita Sloan  
University of Maryland School of Music, Piano Division

The technical difficulties we face and the interpretive decisions we make when playing 20<sup>th</sup> century music are essentially the same as with music from earlier periods. When playing more recent works, we benefit from first-hand accounts which are more readily available, and have greater interpretive freedom in playing music that does not have an established tradition. Studying a composer's writings on theory will aid in analyzing a piece which may not follow traditional rules of form and harmony, and descriptions by their contemporaries can help us in understanding the printed markings in pieces which contain improvisation, extended techniques, or other unusual instructions.

For my dissertation, I have addressed some difficulties unique to American music from the early- to mid-twentieth century. I selected music for three programs, using scores, the writings of composers, critics, and performers, as well as recordings, in my background research. My program notes document this process, and present conclusions which I hope will be useful to other musicians. The repertoire includes art song, chamber music, and solo piano music by Henry Cowell, Elliott Carter, and Vincent Persichetti. These three composers wrote books and essays about the theoretical and artistic ideas behind their own music and that of their contemporaries. Cowell's groundbreaking *New*

*Musical Resources* gave a remarkably concise and prescient overview of possible innovations in rhythm, texture, and harmony, many of which are worked out in his later compositions. Carter published collections of essays which contain detailed introspection on his influences and development. And *Twentieth Century Harmony* by Persichetti remains the most comprehensive and nuanced summary of the various developments and sub-currents from the first half of the century; it is also an invaluable key to understanding Persichetti's indefinable yet immediately recognizable style.

My recitals were presented on October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018, and October 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Audio recordings are available online at ProQuest.com.

TEXTBOOK COMPOSERS:  
A PERFORMANCE STUDY OF AMERICAN MODERNISM

by

Josiah Michael Stocker

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Rita Sloan, Chair

Professor Bradford P. Gowen

Professor Edward Maclary

Dr. R. Timothy McReynolds

Professor Harry Tamvakis, Dean's Representative

## **Preface**

Studying and performing the music of the twentieth century has been my passion since I was an undergraduate, and the opportunity to focus on these rarely heard pieces for my dissertation has been enjoyable as well as enlightening. The program notes from my three dissertation recitals are presented in the body of this document with footnote citations and modified formatting. The printed programs, audio recordings, and videos are available online.

I would like to thank Professor Rita Sloan, whose impact on the musical world is evidenced by the students she has inspired, the audiences she has moved, and the fingering solutions she has marked in scores throughout the world. I know that I will draw on the lessons she has taught for the rest of my life. This project would not have been possible without my musical collaborators, fellow performers, and the faculty at the University of Maryland, from whom I have learned so much. My colleagues at The College of Saint Rose have been exceptionally understanding and supportive during this process; I hope that they and their students will benefit from the experience I have gained. Most importantly, I could not have survived the last three-and-a-half years without the support of my friends, family, and my wife Hyeun.

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**Program #1** (presented October 17, 2018)

*Three Anti-Modernist Songs*.....Henry Cowell

“A Sharp Where You’d Expect a Natural”

“Hark! From the Pit, a Fearsome Sound”

“Who Wrote This Fiendish Rite of Spring”

Jennifer Piazza-Pick, soprano

“The Tides of Manaunaun” and.....Henry Cowell

“The Hero Sun” from *Three Irish Legends*

“I’m Nobody” from *Emily Dickinson Songs*.....Vincent Persichetti

“Thou Child So Wise” from *Hilaire Belloc Songs*

*Sonatina to Hans Christian* from *Harmonium*

*Infanta Marina* from *Harmonium*

“Unquiet Heart” from *James Joyce Songs*

*Two Chinese Songs*

Amanda Densmoor, soprano

Collin Power, baritone

*Infanta Marina* for viola and piano.....Vincent Persichetti

Jinsun Hong, viola

*Piano Sonata*.....Elliott Carter

**Henry Cowell** (1897-1965)

“No other composer of our time has produced a body of works so radical and so normal, so penetrating and so comprehensive. Add to this massive production his long and influential career as a pedagogue, and Henry Cowell's achievement becomes impressive indeed. There is no other quite like it. To be both fecund and right is given to few.”

-Virgil Thomson<sup>1</sup>

The poems set by Cowell as *Three Anti-Modernist Songs* were collected by Nicolas

Slonimsky (1894-1995) for his *Lexicon of Musical Invective*. Slonimsky grouped the

three texts, originally published as anonymous newspaper editorials, together as examples

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<sup>1</sup> Virgil Thomson, *Virgil Thomson: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 167.

typical in their wording and vocabulary.<sup>2</sup> Although they were written four decades apart and malign three different composers (Wagner, Strauss, and Stravinsky respectively), they are strikingly similar to each other, and to earlier critical reactions. For example, words such as “crash” and “bang” have been used to describe the works of Beethoven, Liszt, and others to imply that a composer is writing noise instead of music.

“No rule observe but the exceptional” is an unfair criticism of a composer as studious and methodical as Wagner, but Cowell voiced a similar concern regarding some of his own contemporaries whose “ignorant daring in the use of new materials results in many childish crudities and is often accompanied by absence of musical invention.”<sup>3</sup> His book *New Musical Resources* was one of the earliest attempts to systematize these “new materials,” showing how the numerical relations of the overtone series could determine how innovations in harmony and rhythm could be used correctly (and incorrectly).

The *Three Irish Legends* for piano are a demonstration of how Cowell used different types of clusters not only for their startling effect, but as part of a piece’s harmonic and melodic structure. As in his well-known works *The Banshee* and *The Aeolian Harp*, the result combines folk-like pentatonicism and steady rhythm with an eerie, industrial timbre.

*The Tides of Manaunaun:*

Manaunaun was the god of motion, and long before the creation, he sent forth tremendous tides, which swept to and fro through the universe, and rhythmically moved the particles and materials of which the gods were later to make the suns and worlds.

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<sup>2</sup> Slonimsky, Nicolas. Introduction to *Soundpieces: Interview with American Composers* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> Henry Cowell, *New Musical Resources* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930) xiii.

*The Hero Sun:*

The gods created all the suns and sent them into space. But these suns, instead of lighting the universe, congregated closely together, enjoying each other's society, and the universe was in darkness. Then one of the gods told the suns of a place where people were living in misery on account of the lack of light, and a strong young sun rose and hurled himself out into the darkness, until he came to this place, which was our earth; and the Hero Sun who sacrificed the companionship of the other suns to light the earth is our Sun.

-Stories according to John Varian

**Vincent Persichetti (1915-1987)**

**Bruce Duffie:** "Let me ask the \$64,000 question, then. What constitutes a good piece of music?"

**Persichetti:** [Thinks for a moment] "It's a work that is saying more about less instead of less about more."<sup>4</sup>

Persichetti is best known for his works for orchestra and wind ensemble, but his diverse musical interests can be seen in his large-scale choral works, the 12 piano sonatas, the 9 harpsichord sonatas, and 25 short pieces called *Parables* for various instruments, all of which contain the lyrical melodies and unusual harmonies which mark his elusive yet instantly recognizable style. His songs reveal facets of his style brought out by his affinity for different authors and their writings; he composed six miniature cycles in 1957 on texts by Joyce, Belloc, Dickinson, Frost, Sandburg, and Teasdale. They are excellent examples of Persichetti's innovative use of short forms, vibrant text-painting, and pianistic textures.

The twenty songs of *Harmonium*, composed to texts of Wallace Stevens in 1951, are much more ambitious, and show an even deeper sympathy with the poet. Persichetti was particularly interested in Stevens' idea of artistic transformation, in which an ordinary scene or event takes on a supernatural appearance through the artist's inner

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<sup>4</sup> Vincent Persichetti, *Interview with Bruce Duffie*, Telephone interview, 1986.



vision. One poem affected him in particular with its combination of objectivity and imagination; Persichetti used his own setting of *Infanta Marina* (“Princess of the Sea”) as a point of departure for a much longer piece for viola and piano, which he sub-titled “Reflections on a poem by Wallace Stevens.”

### **Elliott Carter (1908-2012)**

“For me personally, Elliott Carter is also one of the most important composers of the 20th and 21st centuries because he represents substance. He is living proof of uncompromising, complex music, and is for this reason at first glance inaccessible. When one delves into the music and sees its development, it becomes more accessible.”

-Daniel Barenboim<sup>5</sup>

Elliott Carter lived through most of the twentieth century, and was still alive and composing well into the twenty-first. In his lectures and criticism he dealt extensively with the philosophy of music as well as practical aspects of composition, often reflecting on the state of American music and his own place in it. Although he avoided experimentation with serialism, electronics, and aleatoric techniques, he remained at the forefront of musical innovation through his use of organic forms and complicated textures. Recognition came slowly for Carter, but from the 1960's he has been known as a composer of international stature whose style was both uniquely personal and sincere; Igor Stravinsky referred to the *Double Concerto* of 1961 as “A masterpiece- and by an American!”<sup>6</sup>

The *Piano Sonata*, composed in 1946, shows many of the influences which would shape Carter's “mature” style from the 1950's onward: ascending 4ths and 5ths recall the

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel Barenboim, “Elliott Carter,” Accessed 9/1/2018. <https://danielbarenboim.com/elliott-carter>

<sup>6</sup> Nicolas Slonimsky, *Music in the Twentieth Century*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Schirmer Books, 1994), 707.

American neo-classicism of Copland and Piston, while the delicately balanced bi-tonality between B-flat major and B major recalls the Franco-Russian school of Carter's European training. Beneath the dense contrapuntal texture lie the framework of traditional forms: the first movement has a clear introduction, exposition, development, recapitulation, and coda, while the second movement is a rounded binary built around an episodic fugue. The sonata's use of harmonics and resonance anticipated his later sonic experiments with wind instruments, seen in the *Canonic Quartet* and *Canon for 3*.

The most distinctive feature of the *Piano Sonata* is its juxtaposition of fast and slow passages, an idea which Carter attributed to jazz musicians.<sup>7</sup> In later pieces, such as his *Cello Sonata* (1948) and *First String Quartet* (1950-51), this method evolved into "metric modulation", a technique in which the smallest rhythmic value remains constant through a series of shifting meters and accents. The sub-groupings of two, three, and four short notes form larger rhythmic figures, which create the illusion of rubato without establishing a consistent meter. In the sonata's first movement this can be seen in the 16<sup>th</sup> notes of the *scorrevole* ("flowing") passages; in the second movement, it can be seen in the unceasing 8<sup>th</sup> notes of the fugue. Carter's fellow critic-composer Virgil Thomson said that these passages were "to my ear completely original, I have never heard the sound of them or felt the feeling of them before."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Elliott Carter, "The Composer's Choices" in *Collected Essays and Lectures, 1937-1995* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1997), 213.

<sup>8</sup> Virgil Thomson, "Fulfillment Experienced" in *Music Chronicles* (New York: Library of America, 2014), 636.

**Program #2** (presented October 12, 2019)

**Harmonium:**

**Song Cycle for Soprano and Piano by Vincent Persichetti**

Jennifer Piazza-Pick and Margaret Lampasi, sopranos

**Vincent Persichetti** (1915-1987) was a definitive composer of American modernism; he was also an influential teacher and critic, and his textbook *Twentieth Century Harmony* is still used today. By 1951 he had written his famous “war-time” Symphony no. 3, eight of his twelve piano sonatas, his first works for wind ensemble, and for several years had been the head of Juilliard’s composition department. While he had composed two short sets of songs in 1945, he was reluctant to attempt more songs for fear of imposing his own subjective views on a poet’s work.

“One of my biggest ‘hangups’ was the text. If I respected a poem, why should I disturb it with music? If the poetry was watery, music might rescue the verbal muddle, but then I couldn’t tolerate the text... During one of my university visits, I happened to be relaxing in the faculty lounge, where several English professors were discussing an interpretation of a poem called ‘Domination of Black’, by Wallace Stevens, one of our great poets. It struck me that I had just as much right to my idea of what the poem should say, and was justified in expressing my reaction in my medium - music. I realized that poetry is, in reality, a distilled concept, full of implications which may be interpreted in more than one way.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1951, he began setting poems by Stevens; these songs would eventually form the cycle *Harmonium*. As he composed, Persichetti noticed subtle inter-textual relations which he had subconsciously linked using rhythmic motives, distinctive intervals, and accompaniment figures. When he reached the final song of the cycle, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*, he discovered that all of these relations could be found in the

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<sup>9</sup> Vincent Persichetti, Interview with Rudy Shackelford in *Perspectives of New Music* 20 no. 1/2 (1981), 119.

sub-text of its thirteen stanzas;<sup>10</sup> in its melody and substantial piano interludes he summarized his own musical ideas, creating a proportional conclusion to this exceptionally long cycle.

**Wallace Stevens** (1879-1955) was an American poet whose legacy stands apart from imagism, surrealism, and the other denominations of modernist literature. Like his contemporary Charles Ives, Stevens worked as an insurance executive for most of his life, devoting his spare time to poetry as a critic, an advocate, and a singular creative voice. While his first poems appeared in *Poetry* magazine 1915, he did not publish his first collection until 1923 when he was 44 years old. By this time he had already written several essays on poetic theory, later collected and published as *The Necessary Angel* (1951). The language of his prose is itself poetic, and the essays' explicit statements of Stevens' artistic philosophy are an essential starting point to understanding his poetry.

Pianists and singers face an added level of complexity when studying art song. Preparing a performance requires in-depth research and careful consideration of musical and literary factors. Even with all of this information there is still room for subjectivity and the final result will vary, sometimes drastically, from one performance to another. In my notes, I have presented my own interpretation of Stevens' poetry, Persichetti's music, and the relation between the two.

One aspect which I have tried to emphasize, and which many critics have ignored, is the antithetical element in Stevens' poems. His essays clearly identify his philosophical antagonists, and his poems often satirize them. This aspect is closely tied to his sense of humor, which is easier to notice but difficult to portray in all of its subtlety. Persichetti

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 119.

used every compositional material at his disposal to give life to Stevens' ideas as well as the words themselves, and it is up to the performers to reanimate them for our audience.

### 1. Valley Candle

This poem, which Persichetti chose to begin his song cycle, metaphorically displays the two ingredients Stevens considered essential for poetic vision: objectivity and imagination, which should always be carefully balanced:

“...the relation between the imagination and reality is a question, more or less, of precise equilibrium. Thus it is not a question of the difference between grotesque extremes.”<sup>11</sup>

Simultaneously, it demonstrates how they can be used to create a metaphysical image from the simplest object or setting. The image of the candle, made personal and individual by the possessive pronoun, represents a human's sense of both the objectively observed (“it”) and the subjectively perceived (“its image”). The valley, night, and wind all exist in relation to it, and are revealed by its illumination.

Stevens' vocabulary and syntax are clearly intended to slow the pace of reading; the two adjectives evoke empty space, while a majority of the consonants are “soft” or voiced sounds. The slightly altered repetition, ending with the same outcome, negates any sense of narrative progress and suspends the sense of time in these six short lines.

The song begins with the ambiguous A minor/major harmony which dominates much of the cycle; in this song, its simultaneous C and C-sharp are in the closest possible voicing. The melody begins with short scales and small leaps, then in the second half

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<sup>11</sup> Wallace Stevens, “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” in *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 647.

paints the text with wider intervals: “immense” expands from a minor sixth to a minor tenth, “converged” from a major seventh to a minor ninth.

Persichetti did not write any tempo or expressive indication, other than a few soft dynamics and the word *delicately* in the piano part at the end of the first stanza. The opening measures have no instructions, other than the slowest possible metronome marking of 40 beats per minute. The tempo and the dissonant yet static harmonies emphasize the poem’s passive, contemplative mood, beginning the cycle with an expectation of the songs to come.

## 2. The Place of the Solitaires

Obviously selected by the composer for its verbal contrast with “Valley Candle”, the text for Persichetti’s second song builds up a flurry of sound without any intelligible point. The middle stanza’s lines beginning “and” and “or” create a breathless run-on sentence which, in the end, leads back to where it began. The images of water all imply futility: the sea stretching to the horizon with no land in sight, the wheel endlessly revolving, the waves climbing only to fall back again.

In all of these settings, the people described as “Solitaires” are able to move and think, but lack any imaginative or creative force with which to transform their surroundings. This attitude is clearly against Stevens’ own philosophy of poetry, in which the poet must push back against the “pressure of reality”: “The resistance to this pressure or its evasion in the case of individuals of extraordinary imagination cancels the

pressure.”<sup>12</sup> He depicts the literary end-product of solitary thinking in “The Snowman”, which Persichetti set later in this cycle.

The melody of this song focuses on wide, dissonant leaps, particularly the major seventh. These intervals often rise and fall, and avoid any arpeggiation or sequence that would suggest a harmonic pattern. Dissonances between the melody and harmony are never resolved, and the prevalent major seventh of E and D-sharp, sometimes inverted as a ninth, becomes a tonic by default. The introductory material is repeated between the first and second stanzas and after the last stanza, leading to the abrupt and inconclusive cadence; like the poem, the song seems to end without having truly begun.

### 3. Theory

Even more than “Valley Candle”, this poem explicitly states Stevens’ poetic process. The quaint aphorism in the second stanza and the intimate, domestic imagery of the third gently introduce the main theme of *Harmonium* and much of Stevens’ later poetry. The subtle comment on the importance of place counters the indifferent “whether it be” of the previous song. The two “portraits” are presented without context, detail, or explicit meaning; they are still disconnected “instances”, awaiting the reader’s own imagination.

The tempo indicated is a moderate 60, noticeably faster than the contemplative 40 of “Valley Candle”; this song moves beyond imagery to implication, and the interplay between voice and piano adds a further impetus. Persichetti used the same tonal center (A) for “Theory” and “Valley Candle.” The modality, however, is decisively minor in

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 654.

this song: every C-sharp resolves downward to C natural, and the latter is always repeated for emphasis. Accidentals also raise and lower the second and sixth scale degrees, usually following the rising or falling motion of the melody.

The melody is dominated by fourths, which ascend and descend within a narrow range, outlining a calm minor seventh. This pattern returns in the penultimate song, “Of the Surface of Things”, with a raised fourth or tritone which changes the melodic profile to a brighter major seventh. The final chord is an inversion of the E major-seventh chord on which the final song (“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”) ends, serving as an unstable premonition of the cycle’s conclusion.

#### 4. Lunar Paraphrase

After defining Stevens’ theory of artistic creation through positive and negative examples, Persichetti chose this poem as a demonstration. The vague sentence which opens and closes the poem, with its hypnotic rhythm and double alliteration, evokes the setting better than any number of adjectives could. The second stanza is another run-on sentence with no closing punctuation; it is impossible for the reader to determine which of the cascading images is the subject, but their cumulative impressions create an atmosphere out of nothing; the result is neither as humorous as “Metaphors of a Magnifico” nor as frightening as “Domination of Black.”

In 1918, *Poetry* magazine published “Lettres d’un Soldat,” a series of epigraphic poems by Stevens which respond to passages from a work of the same name by the artist Eugène Lemerrier, who had died in 1915. “Lunar Paraphrase” follows a passage which ends, “...the moon drew me to the embroidery of the trees, the pathos of the crosses, the



pitifulness of the houses which we know are in ruins, but which the night draws out as an evocation of peace.”<sup>13</sup>

This is the first song of several in *Harmonium* which are centered on a diminished harmony, and which treat the tritone as a stable consonance. The accompaniment is dominated by descending scales and arpeggios, with a few solid intervals to direct its harmonic motion. The rare complete harmonies include A major, one of the recurring triads of the cycle; here, Persichetti used its held resonance to create eerie undertones and overtones. The voice part contains chant-like phrases of repeated notes, a repeated descent from G-sharp to C-sharp, and a few wide leaps which highlight important words or changes of mood.

### 5. Death of a Soldier

Taken from the same series as “Lunar Paraphrase,” this poem follows the quotation, “The death of a soldier is almost a natural thing.”<sup>14</sup> Its matter-of-fact language recalls the indifference and amorality of the natural world, which humans can quickly adopt in the face of multiplying tragedies. The shrinking lines of each stanza and the regular punctuation reinforce the fatalistic images.

Persichetti’s tempo marking (76 beats per minute) implies a moderate pace, slightly faster than a march but slower than the virtuosic second song. The accompaniment contains rhythmic and melodic fragments reminiscent of a march or fanfare, with an ironic climax at the line “Calling for pomp.” The melody is almost entirely composed of leaps, mostly fourths and fifths. Beneath the chromatic harmonies, there is a repeated bass descent from A to E, finalized by the abrupt ending cadence.

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<sup>13</sup> Wallace Stevens, “Uncollected Poems” in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 541.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 544.

## 6. The Wind Shifts

The use of the neutral term “human” and the absence of any external setting place all of the poem’s emphasis on the universal emotions felt by individuals. These characters contrast, but also form a narrative symbolized by the shifting wind which connects them to each other and to the eighth song, “Six Significant Landscapes.” When Stevens included multiple characters in a poem, he tended to classify and contrast their internal dispositions rather than their external attributes.

None of the states of being described in “The Wind Shifts” are positive, but they are subtly distinct from each other. In the first, second, and fourth stanzas people internally think, feel, or care, in multiple contradictory directions. The duality of their inner life, accented by the word “still,” fits with the imagery of a wind that moves, is moved, and constantly changes direction. The pluralized humans of the third sentence are actively “approaching” - although we do not know who or what they are approaching. In addition to the harsh adverbs, Stevens adds urgency to their actions by repeating the verb.

While dividing the single stanza according to its four sentences, Persichetti also created a rounded binary form with a false recapitulation; the opening and closing sections are slower and in E minor, while the inner sections, except for a brief interruption, are marked *Forward* and modulate to E-flat minor. The clear tonality, established by sustained or repeated bass notes, and the consistently minor mode of this song make it the most tonally stable of the first six, and establishes the restful character indicated by E at several other key points in the cycle.

## 7. The Weeping Burgher

This poem directly follows “The Place of the Solitaires” in Stevens’ original collection, and read together the two poems leave us with a portrait of Stevens’ opponent in a fantasized debate. While the so-called “Solitaires” are aware of the world but unable to make anything of it, the “Burgher” subserviates reality, ignoring or emphasizing it according to his momentary whims. When the moment subsides, however, the “excess” of imagination no longer suffices, and he finds himself lost in a world devoid of truth or meaning.

Some critics have found a possible element of self-parody in this poem: in daily life, Stevens was a successful and respected man of business who could be described as a “Burgher,” and unsightful critics habitually accused him of dilettantism. Stevens, however, would not have described his imagination as “distorting” the world; he always stressed that poetry is produced by creative and objective thought working in harmony: “In poetry, at least, the imagination must not detach itself from reality... The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real.”<sup>15</sup>

To portray the dislocation suffered by a self-deluding mind, Persichetti used large and small leaps which rise and fall seemingly at random. The distinctive opening theme, present in the voice and piano parts, returns in the final stanza of “Six Significant Landscapes” with a more jocose articulation. In the vocal line he made use of the exclamations of “Ah!” and unusual words such as “Scaramouche,” setting them with long lines and melismas. While the song is in 4/4 throughout, the rhythm is dislocated from the beginning by accents which never fall on the same beat twice. The use of slurs,

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<sup>15</sup> Wallace Stevens, “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 645.

accents, and octaves in the high and low registers of the piano signify the speaker's self-importance, and the indicated tempo (112 beats per minute) is neither comfortably slow nor decisively quick.

## 8. Six Significant Landscapes

The "Landscapes" of this short sequence are not described, but are vaguely outlined by the colors and objects they contain; Stevens is more focused on human interactions with nature, regarding them with varying levels of benignity or contempt. The first stanza begins the poem with a mood of contemplation similar to "Theory"; the old man is experiencing the world passively as the flowers he sees, the tree under which he sits, and his own beard all move together in the same wind. The second stanza does not describe the narrator/observer, focusing instead on a series of isolated images presented to a mind by the world outside.

The third and fifth stanzas show a more active relationship between humans and their world; in the third, the speaker is able to transcend physical limits by simply sensing the world, while in the fifth an entire landscape is imprisoned by urban architecture. As in the following song, "In the Clear Season of Grapes," Stevens uses terms borrowed from painting to show that human artifice can only limit, rather than improve upon, natural beauty. This feeling of constriction carries over to the final stanza, which describes a class of people who see the world in a single, easily measured set of dimensions. Unlike the speaker in the third stanza, they stubbornly deny themselves any experience they cannot categorize.

Persichetti set the poem as a small cycle-within-cycle; the six stanzas are distinct but not independent, sharing several major themes and seamlessly joined to one another by piano interludes. This form foreshadows that of the much longer “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”; the voice part is tacet for more than a third of “Landscapes,” compared to just over half of “Blackbird.” Throughout this sequence, the tempo, dissonance, and dynamic level gradually rise to the mock-climax of the sixth stanza, delayed by a few introverted interruptions.

The monophonic piano line and exotic scales accompanying the first stanza recall Persichetti’s *Two Chinese Songs* (1945), and chromatic triplets in the voice and piano echo the wind of song number six, “The Wind Shifts.” The tension between duple and triple rhythms restrain the forward motion of the first four stanzas, gradually giving way to a steady duple rhythm. As in “The Weeping Burgher,” the duple meter sounds confident at first, but becomes ridiculous as the tempo grows increasingly frantic, while the widely-spaced harmonies of the finale sound hollow compared to the luxurious single-note scales of the opening.

As the longest and most complex song thus far, “Landscapes” moves through a number of tonalities before settling on a final cadence. The vocal melody begins in a clear E minor, which the piano’s accidentals gradually pull down to a diminished harmony; the first stanza is in a slow, dreamy tempo with frequent *ritardandos*. The second stanza descends even further to an overtone-series chord built on C; this in turn leads to A minor in which the march-like third stanza begins. When the speaker describes reaching “right up to the sun,” the piano quotes the “cloud” theme from “Death of a Soldier” and the tempo accelerates once again.

The fourth stanza returns the slower tempo of the first, and ends in the same static but unsettled E minor harmony. The melody of the fifth stanza emphasizes the tritone between E and B-flat, which is resolved by an interlude in A major. The final stanza contains every kind of dissonance, but is grounded by A tones and chords in the bass. The scherzo-like quotation from “The Weeping Burgher” which closes the song is in E-flat, and the abrupt return to A in the final measure is a parting joke as well as a transition to the next song.

### 9. In the Clear Season of Grapes

Stevens often borrowed terminology from painting, sculpture, and music to give his metaphors greater depth. This poem openly declares the natural world’s superiority to artistic imitations, echoing the fifth of the “Six Significant Landscapes.” This central comparison between reality and art is paired with allusions to still life and landscape paintings, both of which fall short of their goals when they flatly depict a subject. To Stevens, the quintessential work of art “means more than that”: it distills and conveys a human experience which the viewer (or reader) can enjoy at second hand. “Reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it.”<sup>16</sup>

This movement begins a series of decidedly major songs whose optimism endures the shifting modes of “The Snowman” and the delicate chromaticism of “Tattoo,” until it breaks down in the ambiguities of “Sonatina to Hans Christian.” The lively major tonality of “In the Clear Season of Grapes” contrasts the unresolved A major/minor clash of “Valley Candle,” giving us a false hope that the cycle will come to rest in A major.

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<sup>16</sup> Wallace Stevens, “From the Notebooks” in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 910.

The seemingly dissonant harmonies which begin “In the Clear Season of Grapes” use open voicing (sevenths and ninths), as opposed to the clustered seconds of the cycle’s opening, to illustrate the spacious landscape in which the poet stands; Persichetti contrasted these with close-voiced tertian passages featuring softer dynamics. The voice part is almost completely diatonic to A major, with added color from several G naturals and one C natural. One of the cycle’s most distinctive motives is the dominant-seventh arpeggio which the voice sings on the words “flashier,” “cries,” and “blow.” These contrast the piano’s repeated major sevenths, and returns in several stanzas of “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.”

#### 10. Tea

Like the previous poem, “Tea” employs rich visual imagery reminiscent of painting. Its use of tropical metaphors heightens the contrast between indoor warmth and outdoor cold, and between domestic simplicity and the luxurious world of the imagination. Tea played a flexible role in Stevens’ imagination; in his theoretical treatise *Materia poetica* he wrote: “The whole world is less susceptible to metaphor than a teacup is.”<sup>17</sup> Several other poems by Stevens show its association with exotic ritual, including the decadent “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” and “The Man on the Dump.” Late in his life Stevens gave up alcohol for health reasons, and became a connoisseur of teas.

This setting is one of Persichetti’s charmingly tonal and rhythmic songs, with a steady bass line and off-beat chords in C major. As a result, the scattered accidentals sound “wrong”; they are isolated by the prevailing diatonicism, and do not imply a

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 921.

modulation until the long melisma in C-sharp near the end. Persichetti emphasized the intimate nature of the poem with the indication *lightly* in both parts, and dynamics ranging from *mezzo-piano* to *pianissimo*. The constantly shifting meter is smoothed over by the lyrical bass-line, and its effect is much more placid than the heavily-accented 4/4 of “Solitaires” or “Burgher.”

### 11. The Snow Man

It is a mistake to take this poem’s opening line as a literal injunction: the word “not,” appearing in the third stanza, separates the passive verbs “regard” and “behold” from the creative action of “thinking.” As we have seen when discussing songs 2 and 7, Stevens believed that these two mindsets are equally necessary. The “Snow Man” named in the title is not described, and like the “Solitaires” of the second song does not affect or act upon the world around him; the title implies that he is not fully human, and in the final line he does not even exist. An absolutely neutral perspective is the highest goal for schools of Realism, but for Stevens it was a literary dead-end: “There can be no poetry without the personality of the poet... He must be able to abstract himself and also to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination.”<sup>18</sup>

The poem is a single sentence propelled forward by conjunctions, with a storm of confusing grammar in which the reader can easily lose track of the subject/narrator. The Snow Man’s serene meditation is interrupted by the adjectives and shades of emotion which creep into his carefully-balanced phrasing.

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<sup>18</sup> Wallace Stevens, “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 657.



Persichetti depicted the absurdity of untempered objectiveness in the song's active but aimless accompaniment. The majority of the piano part consists of wandering scales, whose Lydian accidentals could lead to a modulation if they did not change direction several times per measure. The bright modality and flat timbre of legato without pedal add to the deserted effect. The middle section adds dissonant yet hollow chords which do nothing to warm or color the empty landscape. The vocal part, in contrast, has a steady rhythm and tonal direction. Although subtle, the text-painting of the words "shagged" and "misery" expose the irony of self-described realism in poetry or music: a voice cannot sing about these images without depicting them, and a listener cannot hear them without forming associations.

## 12. Tattoo

This poem begins with a hazy vision which gradually grows clearer, but remains focused on realistic objects and minute details. It treats vision as active, while showing how the mind can transform ordinary sights and scenery into a surreality full of hidden meaning. Although the images are not vivid or exotic, the way Stevens describes them leaves a "tattoo" or after-image on our minds; this way of thinking can change the way we see the world, leaving its own impression on the world we see.

The song is grounded by the piano's triadic, chorale-like harmonies which travel within a narrow range, as the two hands move in contrary motion throughout each phrase before reuniting at the beginning of the next. The vocal line weaves in and out of this texture, with a variety of rhythms and ties which unsettle the piano's steady pulse. This atmosphere of suspension and unreality contrasts with the concrete images of the poem;

the listener can experience a kind of dual vision by focusing simultaneously on objects and images.

### 13. Sonatina to Hans Christian

In this poem Stevens pays tribute to the Danish author Hans Christian Andersen, whose tales for children contained deep and sometimes disturbing layers of truth. His inventiveness, vivid imagery, and insight into human character give his stories more merit and relevance than much “high” literature.

After contemplating the transformation of an ordinary duck into a wicked step-mother, Stevens speculates, with some regret, on the stories which Andersen might have written; in particular, he wonders what stories a writer could tell when freed from mortal limitations. The humble storyteller becomes an almost Promethean image of an artist who has both metaphysical insight and the ability to communicate that insight to the living.

The song’s most distinctive feature is the bright alberti-bass accompaniment, which alternates with sliding, chromatic chords; together they mimic the innocence of fairy tales, which often masks a sinister fatalism. The piano remains in the middle register until the eerie treble chords of the epilogue suggest a very different kind of story. The vocal melody outlines triads which sometimes follow, and sometimes clash with the accompaniment’s harmonies. Located about halfway through the cycle, this “Sonatina” is a reminder of the A major/minor uncertainty of the first song, and begins a descent to the work’s conclusion in E major.

#### 14. Infanta Marina

The Spanish title, which means “Princes of the sea,” along with the images of palms, sand, and the luxurious movements of the subject recall Stevens’ favorite retreats on Florida’s Atlantic coast. Every noun is part of a possessive phrase, belonging to or associated with something else. The “Infanta” is at the center of this web of connections, and the title implies that she rules or even creates the scene. She is active in the world, “roaming” and “partaking,” but does not speak, and it is unclear whether the poetic drama takes place in her own mind or that of the narrating observer.

The song’s harmonies are richly dissonant and wander freely through all of the twelve tones, but E major is strongly implied throughout and finalized by an elongated mixolydian/phrygian cadence. Each phrase of the vocal melody moves within a narrow range, rising a few steps higher each time before receding again. Its sweeping contours and a few short melismas trace the slow, wandering steps of the woman in the sand. The solid chords of the accompaniment establish a steady triple rhythm, then are replaced by polyphonic lines which follow after the voice’s sinuous path.

These two songs make a satisfying pair with their contrasting meters, articulations, and harmonic vocabularies. Their tonal centers, A and E respectively, reinforce the two dominant harmonic tendencies of the cycle, and their journey from the major/minor ambiguity of A to a richly chromatic yet stable E major are a miniature of the twenty songs’ overall direction, here at the piece’s mid-point.

### 15. Metaphors of a Magnifico

20m x 1b x 1v = 20m x 20b x 20v

This poem alternates rapidly between external imagery and the poet's introspection. In the observational portions, Stevens uncharacteristically dwells on the subject (or subjects) while the "background" of scenery and sound come late into the poem, then trail off without any further implication. The ellipses and the elusive "meaning" express the speaker's frustration after repeated attempts to capture a thought. This feeling of futility leads to the poet's mock-surrender to rationality in the following song, "Gubbinal."

Against a steady 2/4 and dissonant, close-voiced harmonies, Persichetti differentiates the two modes of thought (observation and introspection) using dramatic changes in dynamics and rhythmic activity. The vocal part is motivated in the rhythmically active passages by melismas and repeated notes, and in the softer passages by syncopated ties and wide leaps. The indicated tempo is 120 beats per minute, setting a steady but unhurried march for the self-important man (or men) and a fluid stream for the poet's interrupted thoughts.

### 16. Gubbinal

In this humorous poem, with its short, repetitive lines, Stevens once again set himself against a hypothetical antagonist. As in "The Snowman," he pointed out the irony of a rationalist view of the world by using colorful adjectives and metaphors to describe an ordinary scene. By addressing them in the second person, he identified himself even more closely with the opposing side.

The opening tritone between E and B-flat takes nine slow measures to resolve on an A major triad. As in “Lunar Paraphrase,” the resonance of this simple chord is sustained through a short melodic phrase. Other than a few held chords, the bulk of the accompaniment consists of two widely-spaced voices which leave a bleak, empty space between them. Persichetti mirrored the poet’s disappointment and disillusion in the voice part with an emphasis on ascending minor thirds and descending half-steps, adding a touch of irony by delaying the voice’s final downward motion after the piano’s resolution.

### 17. Domination of Black

One of Stevens’ most discussed poems, “Domination of Black” is an essay in mental manipulation, creating an entire imaginary world without providing a firm description of the setting or its inhabitants. Each of the images shifts its position, and alternates between objects (e.g., “the leaves themselves”) and attributes (“the colors of the leaves”). Part of the unreality comes from the way in which adjectives and nouns are mixed, forming unusual pairs such as “loud fire” and “heavy hemlocks” which leave vague impression. The “colors” of various objects are never named, but the title and the images of night illuminated by fire suggest dark, oppressive shades. Visual imagery is mixed with sound and motion, and the indoor setting creates a sense of confinement that is violently shattered by the cosmic language of the last stanza. The final effect on the reader’s mind comes from their subconscious need for coherence, which imposes a kind of order on the distorted, cubist scene.

As the quote at the beginning of these notes shows, this poem played an important role in the creation of Persichetti's song cycle, and all of his later compositions for voice. The composer may be inspired to set a poem by a passing glance, a recommendation from a friend, or after long and careful study, but ultimately they will only make the effort when they have a new perspective to share with their audience. Creating a song from this complex, confusing poem was obviously a challenge which Persichetti considered worthwhile.

The musical setting, like the poem, introduces thematic material that is then repeated out of context to create a sense of continuity without any specific associations. The slowly expanding intervals introduced monophonically by the pianist's left-hand are repeated in various textures, rhythms, and registers: they form an ostinato bass for static harmonies, a *motum perpetuum* at a faster tempo, and melodic fragments repeated over sustained chords. The musical depictions of color and sound are the only continuous thread uniting the dream-like sequence. Some of the tempo changes occur gradually, accompanied by an increase in harmonic and rhythmic tension; others are abrupt, with sudden interruptions of the texture.

The song's dense, opaque harmonies are based on close- and open-voiced clusters around its tonal center of D-sharp. The bass line moves incrementally up and down the scale beneath the shifting chords and polyphonic lines, never coming to rest and always returning to the tonic with an ominous importance. Without a consistent mode or scale, the tonal weight rests entirely on a single pitch, D-sharp, which leads directly to E minor in song 18 and anticipates the E major on which the cycle concludes.

## 18. Earthy Anecdote

The poem shares its varied repetitions, and the resulting nonsensical word-associations, with the text of the preceding song. The overall effect is just as difficult to describe; the setting is obviously rural, and the active verbs resemble a dance-step diagram seen from above, but the absence of any human perspective or emotional comment place the action in an eerie, deserted setting. The “firecat” does not refer to a specific creature of folklore but, as every storyteller knows, the most frightening monster is always the most vaguely described. The “bucks” also do not have a species, and are identified only by their role as frightened prey. The first two words imply that that the story has been, and will be, repeated endlessly.

“Earthy Anecdote” was placed first in the collection *Harmonium*. Stevens chose to begin his first book with this deceptively simple narration; a reader unfamiliar with his style may not see any deeper meaning in the poem, but can still enjoy his wordplay and imagery for their own sake.

The piano’s heavily accented octaves, repeated eighth notes, and short, hiccupping eighth rests accompany the verbal dance. The constantly changing meters of three and four recall the setting of “Tea,” but the leaping bass line of “Earthy Anecdote” is much more accented than the smooth counter-melody in “Tea.” Some of the vocal phrases are repetitive and syllabic, and others have long, sweeping lines and melismas. While the song is dissonant and rhythmically active, its simplicity, as well as the peaceful stasis of the following song, provides a respite before the finale’s massive accumulation of images.

### 19. Of the Surface of Things

This poem is almost written as prose; each of the uneven lines is a complete phrase or sentence, ending with a punctuation mark. In the three numbered stanzas, the speaker progresses from simple catalogue to metaphor and, finally, a complete transformation of reality. It is unclear whether these are three descriptions of the same scene, or isolated memories separated by time and distance. In the first two stanzas the speaker is explicitly present, and is obviously still altering the scene in the third.

Persichetti placed a clear re-statement of the cycle's thesis before the final demonstration of song twenty. The rocking fourths of the third song, "Theory," are altered by raising the uppermost note, creating an interior tritone and outlining a stable major seventh instead of the original, expectant minor seventh. The piano's repeated chords beat a constant slow pulse, and only change harmony three times. Each of the chords contains static fourths and seconds, and the root steadily descends through A, G, and F-sharp, deceptively preparing for a resolution on E. The bass actually descends further, to E-flat, while the voice comes to rest on E-natural, forming a dissonant minor ninth; its resolution only comes when it is inverted (to a stable major seventh) at the end of the last and longest song in the cycle.



## 20. Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

The final song contains very little new material; nearly every note of the melody and accompaniment has been heard before in one or more songs. Below I have listed all of the references that I have identified.

Introduction: intervals from Domination (17), widely-spaced tritone and contrary motion

from Gubbinal (16), A triad from Theory (3) with altered root in B-flat

I: Sol-Me-Re-Do melody from Sonatina (13), return to Gubbinal (16)

Transition: Triads from Tattoo (12) transposed, melody from Sonatina (13) at a slower tempo

II: A major/minor from Theory (3), brief cadence similar to Tattoo (12)

Transition: legato chords from “Landscapes” (8v6), accompaniment from Metaphors (15) at a slower tempo & accelerating

III: Accompaniment references Metaphors (15), abruptly changes to Landscapes (8v1)

Transition: Harmonized triplets from Wind Shifts (6), chords from Landscapes (8v3)

IV: Brief thirds from Valley (1), ornament from Landscapes (8v1)

Transition: Accompaniment from B section of Metaphors (15), opening of Valley (1) at half tempo; new texture in 6/8 with quotations from Tea (10), Infanta (14)

V: Sudden isolated quotation of Snowman (11) accompaniment, Tea (10)

Transition: Contrapuntal use of melody from Tea (10) and Infanta (14), tempo change and harmonization of Domination (17)

VI: Continuation of Domination (17), very brief pick-up from Snowman (11)

Transition: 2 measure, ornament from Landscapes (8v1)

VII. Accompaniment figures from Soldier (5), Landscapes (8v6), Grapes (9), dominant arpeggio from Grapes (9)

Transition: Coda from Burgher (7) as seen in Landscapes (8v6); folk-like fifths and melody from Grapes (9)

VIII. Accompaniment from Metaphors (15), tempo change to “Freely” from Landscapes (8v5)

Transition: Intervals from Domination (17) widely spaced, un-measured but in tempo, fragment from Infanta (14)

IX. Large section of Domination (17) with voice singing bass-line

Transition: Continuation of Domination (17), fermata followed by accompaniment from Metaphors (15), interlude from Burgher (7)

X. Continuation of Burgher (7), changes to Solitaires (2)

Transition: Continuation of Solitaires (2), accompaniment from Earthy (18) slower then accelerating

XI. Texture from Earthy (18) with steady hemiola rhythm, unmeasured “Slowly” section

Transition: Descending arpeggios from Lunar (4)

XII. Repeated notes and arpeggios from Lunar (4)

Transition: Introduction from Infanta (14) in the same key, with doubled rhythmic values

XIII. Long, seamless quotations from Infanta (14) in voice and piano, cadential transition to Tattoo (12)

Coda: Gradual thinning of texture ending on root-position version of harmony from Theory (3)



by Hart Crane paints an impressionist scene with parallel harmonies in massed groups of strings and winds; and the late work *In Sleep, in Thunder* pits two singers against a sparse Weberian texture filled with every type of dissonance and cross-rhythm imaginable.

These short songs on texts by **Robert Frost** (1874-1962) offer a glimpse of Carter's debt to his friend and mentor Charles Ives: their compact forms and straightforward text settings are unusual for Carter, even during this early period, and their harmonies, while adventurous, are always at the service of clearly tonal ideas. In his orchestral version the prominence of the guitar, open fifths in the strings, and punctuating woodwinds are obvious echoes of the iconic Americana style of his contemporary Aaron Copland.

In the original version with piano, the sparkingly dissonant harmonies of *Dust of Snow* are even more noticeable. Beneath the voice's sustained notes, its insistent syncopations highlight the ironic humor of the event, growing softer and more reflective with the second stanza's unexpected twist. *The Rose Family* follows a steady 5/8 with two brief interruptions: first with the poet's frustration at the taxonomist's unconcern for artistic sensibility and, later, by a belated and indirect acknowledgment of the poem's inspiration.

### **Pastoral** (1940)

Originally composed for English horn and piano, this piece has been transcribed by Carter and others for clarinet, oboe, cello and saxophone. Although it predates the *Piano Sonata* and *Cello Sonata*, the *Pastoral* uses the same resonance techniques which Carter would later refine in his chamber works: overtones sustained by held chords,

melodic fourths and fifths, and an integrated texture in which the melody passes seamlessly between instruments. As in all of Carter's music, there are specific indications in English and Italian which must be carefully observed to bring out the motives and counter-melodies embedded in the counterpoint. The multi-section form is propelled by a fluid rhythmic pulse which gradually accelerates toward the middle *Giocoso* section, and is interspersed with repeated figures and syncopations.

### **Henry Cowell (1897-1965)**

These two songs from late in Cowell's career conclude a body of vocal works reaching back to his teenage settings of R.L. Stevenson. It is difficult to define Cowell's overall style because his catalogue is so large and varied (he wrote over 900 compositions, many of them in genres he invented), but his songs do tend to show a warmer, more lyrical side of his musical personality than his orchestral and chamber works. His use of time signature and key signatures can give performers a false sense of security before we have noticed the rhythmic and harmonic traps left for us in the details.

**Gene Baro** (1924-1982) was an art critic, appraiser, and museum curator active in artistic circles in America and the United Kingdom; this poem was published by *The New Yorker* in 1962, and is the only text by Baro which Cowell set. The song is dedicated to Theodor Uppman, a Swedish-American baritone who created the title role in Britten's opera *Billy Budd*. The accompaniment's close-voiced harmonies overlap or double much of the vocal line, evoking the speaker's confinement in cramped surroundings. Some obvious text-painting imitates the sounds of the night wind and tree

branches, but ultimately Cowell was sketching a psychological scene using the emotions of nameless people which finally recede, still unresolved, in sleep.

**William Blake** (1757-1827) foreshadowed the Romantic excesses of the later nineteenth century in his feverishly imaginative poetry, paintings, and etchings. Cowell set one other text by Blake, the poem “Daybreak.” “The Little Black Boy” is dedicated to Roland Hayes, the breakthrough African-American tenor who performed in London in 1920, Berlin in 1924, and had a daughter with a Bohemian ex-Countess in 1926. The thick bass chords, pentatonic parallelism, and asymmetrical meters suggest a non-specific folk idiom. Cowell was a prominent early figure in the field of ethnomusicology, and could subtly incorporate these elements into his own style. He also omitted the poem’s outer stanzas, which are addressed to “the English child” and refer more explicitly to the abolitionist movement which had just begun when the poem was published in 1789. Virgil Thomson set the complete poem in his cycle *Five Songs from William Blake*.

### **Trio in Nine Short Movements (1965)**

One of the last pieces Cowell composed, the *Trio in Nine Short Movements* is a final reminder that his lifelong iconoclasm did not diminish with age. Earlier in his life he had experimented with other instrumental ensembles, such as the saxophone quartet, several string quartets, various combinations of winds, and non-western instruments including the sitar and tambura. He took advantage of the Cohn foundation’s commission for a piano trio to re-imagine this well-respected genre of chamber music.

The nine movements range from thirty seconds to three minutes. Each has two or more melodic themes or accompaniment figures which Cowell alternates and combines

freely. Each has a single tempo marking; some are punctuated by a slight *ritardando* or brief *fermata*, but none is long enough to support a multi-section form. The fluidity of rhythmic motives within a consistent tempo is especially important for a texture in which each instrument functions independently. This sense of continuity and the abrupt ending create an impression of music which extends beyond the final notes, reverberating like undamped strings.

### **Vincent Persichetti (1915-1987)**

#### **Fourth Piano Sonata (1949)**

“I am my ideal composer. I write my favorite music.  
I like music to move between soft and prickly bushes.”<sup>19</sup>

Persichetti’s works for piano include 12 sonatas, 6 sonatinas, and numerous shorter pieces. The shorter second sonata is an excellent introduction for younger pianists to modernist harmony and form, while the tenth and eleventh are recognized as his greatest contributions to the pianist’s repertoire. From the very beginning the sonatas show Persichetti’s experimentation with extended techniques, thematic transformation, programmatic titles, and innovative forms. Above all, they are his clearest applications of the theoretical principles outlined in his textbook *Twentieth Century Harmony*. They are each dedicated to his wife, the concert pianist Dorothea Persichetti.

In his sonatas and symphonies of this period, Persichetti eschewed traditional Italian movement titles (*Adagio*, *Allegro*, etc.) in favor of English words, such as *Fervent* or *Timidly*, and metronome markings. The fourth sonata contains three movements, each

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<sup>19</sup> Persichetti, Vincent. Undated manuscript. Held in *Vincent Persichetti Collection*, Greenwood Library, Longwood University, Farmville, VA.

with two or three clearly defined sections. The outer movements are compact forms centered on D major, with brief modulations; the second movement intertwines passages in E-flat major and E minor, sometimes overlapping themes in both keys at once.

The first movement presents a single melodic theme in multiple guises. It begins with a declamatory introduction marked *Broadly*, which twice approaches a climax before evaporating into the upper end of the keyboard. This is followed by a section in 6/8, marked *Intimately*, which is a miniature rounded-binary or “song” form. It shifts abruptly into the angular subject of the fugal finale. Persichetti used all of the traditional fugal techniques, including stretto, fragmentation, inversion, and a complete statement in rhythmic augmentation.

The second movement is a cross between slow movement and scherzo, with lyrical melodies and light-hearted percussive effects. Its legato opening theme makes several prominent returns throughout the movement, and a few oblique references to it are embedded in the texture. The opening tempo, indicated *Moderately*, is frequently broken up by slight *ritardandos*, but the eighth note pulse flows steadily through the 6/8 and occasional extensions in 4/8, 5/8, and 9/8. The majority of the movement favors the piano’s upper range, giving greater harmonic weight to occasional low octaves.

The third movement is a complete Sonata-allegro form, with a slow introduction (marked *Plaintively*) and a driving coda. The main section, marked *Briskly*, relies on brilliant passagework with scales, arpeggios, repeated notes, and very few rests. Its eighth-note pulse persists through triple and duple meters, mostly *staccato* but with some short, precipitous slurs. The contrasting or “secondary” theme, marked *Relaxed*, is in a flowing 6/8, and has a more homophonic texture than the *Intimately* section of the first



movement. In the midst of all this rhythmic and melodic activity, Persichetti outlines a simple form with a number of themes, each of which appears in multiple keys but always with the same character.

Some of the 12 piano sonatas favor quartal harmony, others are based on extended tertian chords. They feature percussive, resonant, and virtuosic effects and extended techniques; their forms include explorations of the classical four-movement scheme as well as experiments with organic single-movements; and they vary in length from less than five minutes to more than twenty. Persichetti gave the premiere performance of the Fourth Sonata himself. Its blending of forms, styles, and harmonies gives it a more personal quality than his other neo-classical works, and after learning it I have a much better understanding of Persichetti's modes of composition and how he wanted his works performed.

## Concluding Remarks

I was encouraged by the reception we received at these performances. It has been my experience that even the most unsophisticated listeners will go on a musical journey if they are ably led. Careful selection of literature, planning of the program, and collaboration with other performers are all necessary, regardless of how well-known or unknown the composer. Not every piece is appropriate for every musician or audience, but between these three composers I was able to find enough variety to plan and prepare three engaging concerts.

When playing 20<sup>th</sup> century music, we can draw on a wealth of written material greater than any earlier period. Cowell, Carter, and Persichetti left bodies of writing, as well as music, that can inform our performances. For example, the clear, concise explanations found in Cowell's *New Musical Resources* show that his use of clusters and other extended techniques were the result of methodical study, and not experimentation for novelty's sake. Carter's essays and lectures show his acute awareness of his own influences; for example, the forms of his Piano and Cello sonatas may seem to defy analysis, but after a closer look they show the influence of post-Romantic sonata forms, especially the string sonatas of Debussy. This type of knowledge is an essential when working towards an intelligible performance. And the wealth of musical examples in Persichetti's *20<sup>th</sup> Century Harmony* provide context for his blending of tertian and non-tertian harmony, and how it relates to the instrumental and vocal repertoire of earlier composers.

I would encourage performers interested in American music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to use all available resources. As we move further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we should bear in

mind that this is no longer “new music”, and that audiences will appreciate or reject it based, in part, on how well we present it. By making educated and artistically sound choices regarding programming and interpretation, we can ensure that American composers will remain a part of the standard repertoire, and will be enjoyed by audiences for generations to come.

## Appendix: Song Texts

### Three Anti-modernist Songs<sup>20</sup>

#### *Directions for Composing a Wagner Overture*

(From an American newspaper, ca. 1884, signed “A Sufferer”)

A sharp, where you’d expect a natural.  
 A natural, where you’d expect a sharp.  
 No rule observe but the exceptional  
 And then (first happy thought) bring in a Harp!

No bar a sequence to the bar behind,  
 No bar a prelude to the next that comes.  
 Which follows which, you really needn’t mind: --  
 But (second happy thought!) bring in your Drums!

For harmonies, let wild discords pass;  
 Let key be blent with key in hideous hash;  
 Then (for last happy thought!) bring in your Brass!  
 And clang, clash, clatter – clatter, clang and clash.

#### *A Night at the Opera*

(From the New York *World*, inspired by some music of Richard Strauss, ca. January 1909)

Hark! from the pit a fearsome sound  
 That makes your blood run cold.  
 Symphonic cyclones rush around--  
 And the worst is yet untold.

No— they unchain those dogs of war,  
 The wild sarrusophones,  
 A double-bass E-flat to roar  
 Whilst crunching dead men’s bones.

The muted tuba’s dismal groan  
 Uprising from the gloom  
 And answered by the heckelphone,  
 Suggest the crack of doom.

Oh, mama! is this the earthquake zone?  
 What ho, there! stand from under!  
 Or is that the tonitruone

---

<sup>20</sup> Nicolas Slonimsky, *Music Since 1900*, Fifth Edition (New York: Macmillan, 1994), 1015.

Just imitating thunder?

Nay, fear not, little one, because  
Of this sublime rough-house;  
'Tis modern opera by the laws  
Of Master Richard Strauss.

Singers? they're scarcely heard nor seen--  
In yon back seat they sit,  
The day of Song is past, I ween;  
The orchestra is it.

*Who Wrote this Fiendish "Rite of Spring"*

(From the Boston *Herald*, February 1924, inspired by Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps*)

Who wrote this fiendish "Rite of Spring,"  
What right had he to write the thing,  
Against our helpless ears to fling  
Its crash, clash, cling, clang, bing, bang, bing?

And then to call it "Rite of Spring."  
The season when on joyous wing  
The birds melodious carols sing  
And harmony's in everything!

He who could write the "Rite of Spring"  
If I be right, by right should swing!

**I'm Nobody** (Emily Dickinson)

I'm nobody! Who are you?  
Are you Nobody too?  
Then there's a pair of us!  
Don't tell! they'd banish us, you know.

How dreary to be Somebody!  
How public like a Frog -  
To tell your name the livelong day  
To an admiring Bog!

**The Birds** (Hilaire Belloc)

When Jesus Christ was four years old  
The angels brought Him toys of gold,  
Which no man ever had bought or sold.

And yet with these He would not play.  
 He made Him small fowl out of clay,  
 And blessed them till they flew away:  
 Tu creasti Domine.

Jesus Christ, Thou child so wise,  
 Bless mind hands and fill mine eyes,  
 And bring my soul to Paradise.

**"Sleep now, O sleep now"** (James Joyce)

Sleep now, O sleep now,  
 O you unquiet heart!  
 A voice crying "Sleep now"  
 Is heard in my heart.

The voice of the winter  
 Is heard at the door.  
 O sleep, for the winter  
 Is crying "Sleep no more."

My kiss will give peace now  
 And quiet to your heart --  
 Sleep on in peace now,  
 O you unquiet heart!

**Poems from Harmonium**<sup>21</sup> (Wallace Stevens)

1. Valley Candle  
 (poem 27 in the second edition)

My candle burned alone in an immense valley.  
 Beams of the huge night converged upon it,  
 Until the wind blew.  
 Then beams of the huge night  
 Converged upon its image,  
 Until the wind blew.

2. The Place of the Solitaires  
 (poem 37 in the second edition)

Let the place of the solitaires  
 Be a place of perpetual undulation.

---

<sup>21</sup> As printed in the second edition, published in 1931 and collected in *Complete Poems* in 1954.

Whether it be in mid-sea  
 On the dark, green water-wheel,  
 Or on the beaches,  
 There must be no cessation  
 Of motion, or of the noise of motion,  
 The renewal of noise  
 And manifold continuation;  
 And, most, of the motion of thought  
 And its restless iteration,

In the place of the solitaires,  
 Which is to be a place of perpetual undulation.

### 3. Theory (poem 64 in the second edition)

I am what is around me.

Women understand this.  
 One is not duchess  
 A hundred yards from a carriage.

These, then are portraits:  
 A black vestibule;<sup>22</sup>  
 A high bed sheltered by curtains.

These are merely instances.

### 4. Lunar Paraphrase (poem 77 in the second edition, added 1931)

The moon is the mother of pathos and pity.

When, at the wearier end of November,  
 Her old light moves along the branches,  
 Feebly, slowly, depending upon them;  
 When the body of Jesus hangs in a pallor,  
 Humanly near, and the figure of Mary,  
 Touched on by hoar-frost, shrinks in a shelter  
 Made by the leaves, that have rotted and fallen;  
 When over the houses, a golden illusion

---

<sup>22</sup> A vestibule is a hallway or entryway leading into a room or building.

Brings back an earlier season of quiet  
And quieting dreams in the sleepers in darkness-

The moon is the mother of pathos and pity.

5. Death of a Soldier  
(poem 71 in the second edition, added 1931)

Life contracts and death is expected,  
As in a season of autumn.  
The soldier falls.

He does not become a three-days personage,  
Imposing his separation,  
Calling for pomp.

Death is absolute and without memorial,  
As in a season of autumn,  
When the wind stops,

When the wind stops and, over the heavens,  
The clouds go, nevertheless,  
In their direction.

6. The Wind Shifts  
(poem 60 in the second edition)

This is how the wind shifts:  
Like the thoughts of an old human,  
Who still thinks eagerly  
And despairingly.  
The wind shifts like this:  
Like a human without illusions,  
Who still feels irrational things within her.  
The wind shifts like this:  
Like humans approaching proudly,  
Like humans approaching angrily.  
This is how the wind shifts:  
Like a human, heavy and heavy,  
Who does not care.

7. The Weeping Burgher  
(poem 38 in the second edition)



It is with a strange malice  
That I distort the world.

Ah! that ill humors  
Should mask as white girls.  
And ah! that Scaramouch  
Should have a black barouche.<sup>23</sup>

The sorry verities!  
Yet in excess, continual,  
There is cure of sorrow.

Permit that if as ghost I come  
Among the people burning in me still,  
I come as belle design  
Of foppish line.

And I, then, tortured for old speech,  
A white of wildly woven rings;  
I, weeping in a calcined heart,<sup>24</sup>  
My hands such sharp, imagined things.

#### 8. Six Significant Landscapes (poem 50 in the second edition)

I.  
An old man sits  
In the shadow of a pine tree  
In China.  
He sees larkspur,  
Blue and white,  
At the edge of the shadow,  
Move in the wind.  
His beard moves in the wind.  
The pine tree moves in the wind.  
Thus water flows  
Over weeds.

II.  
The night is the color  
Of a woman's arm:

IV.  
When my dream was near the moon,  
The white folds of its gown  
Filled with yellow light.  
The soles of its feet  
Grew red.  
Its hair filled  
With certain blue crystallizations  
From stars,  
Not far off.

V.  
Not all the knives of the lamp-posts,  
Nor the chisels of the long streets,

---

<sup>23</sup> A barouche is an ornate two-horse carriage, popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>24</sup> A heart becomes calcined when the aortic valve is blocked by calcium deposits.

Night, the female,  
Obscure,  
Fragrant and supple,  
Conceals herself.  
A pool shines,  
Like a bracelet  
Shaken in a dance.

Nor the mallets of the domes  
And high towers,  
Can carve  
What one star can carve,  
Shining through the grape-leaves.

III.  
I measure myself  
Against a tall tree.  
I find that I am much taller,  
For I reach right up to the sun,  
With my eye;  
And I reach to the shore of the sea  
With my ear.  
Nevertheless, I dislike  
The way the ants crawl  
In and out of my shadow.

VI.  
Rationalists, wearing square hats,  
Think, in square rooms,  
Looking at the floor,  
Looking at the ceiling.  
They confine themselves  
To right-angled triangles.  
If they tried rhomboids,  
Cones, waving lines, ellipses-  
As for example, the ellipse of the half-moon-  
Rationalists would wear sombreros.

9. In the Clear Season of Grapes  
(poem 81, added 1931)

The mountains between our lands and the sea -  
This conjunction of mountains and sea and our lands -  
Have I stopped and thought of its point before?

When I think of our lands I think of the house  
And the table that holds a platter of pears,  
Vermilion smeared over green, arranged for show.

But this gross blue under rolling bronzes  
Belittles those carefully chosen daubs.<sup>25</sup>  
Flashier fruits! A flip for the sun and moon,

If they mean no more than that. But they do.  
And mountains and the sea do. And our lands.  
And the welter of frost and the fox cries do.

Much more than that. Autumnal passages  
Are overhung by the shadows of the rocks

---

<sup>25</sup> A daub is literally a smear of paint; the word can be used to disparage paintings of any style.

And his nostrils blow out salt around each man.

#### 10. Tea

(poem 84 in the second edition)

When the elephant's-ear in the park<sup>26</sup>  
 Shrivelled in frost,  
 And the leaves on the paths  
 Ran like rats,  
 Your lamp-light fell  
 On shining pillows,  
 Of sea-shades and sky-shades,  
 Like umbrellas in Java.

#### 11. The Snow Man

(poem 8 in the second edition)

One must have a mind of winter  
 To regard the frost and the boughs  
 Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time  
 To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
 The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think  
 Of any misery in the sound of the wind,  
 In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land  
 Full of the same wind  
 That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
 And, nothing himself, beholds  
 Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

#### 12. Tattoo

(poem 57 in the second edition)

The light is like a spider.  
 It crawls over the water.

---

<sup>26</sup> "Elephant's-ear" may refer to any of a number of tropical plants with large, creased leaves; most often the taro-root plant.

It crawls over the edges of the snow.  
 It crawls under your eyelids  
 And spreads its webs there-  
 Its two webs.

The webs of your eyes  
 Are fastened  
 To the flesh and bones of you  
 As to rafters or grass.

There are filaments of your eyes  
 On the surface of the water  
 And in the edges of the snow.

13. Sonatina to Hans Christian  
 (poem 80, added 1931)

If any duck in any brook,  
 Fluttering the water  
 For your crumb,  
 Seemed the helpless daughter

Of a mother  
 Regretful that she bore her;  
 Or of another,  
 Barren, and longing for her;

What of the dove,  
 Or thrush, or any singing mysteries?  
 What of the trees  
 And intonations of the trees?

What of the night  
 That lights and dims the stars?  
 Do you know, Hans Christian,  
 Now that you see the night?

14. Infanta Marina  
 (poem 6 in the second edition)

Her terrace was the sand  
 And the palms and the twilight.

She made of the motions of her wrist  
 The grandiose gestures

Of her thought.

The rumpling of the plumes  
Of this creature of the evening  
Came to be sleights of sails  
Over the sea.

And thus she roamed  
In the roamings of her fan,

Partaking of the sea,  
And of the evening,  
As they flowed around  
And uttered their subsiding sound.

15. Metaphors of a Magnifico<sup>27</sup>  
(poem 13 in the second edition)

Twenty men crossing a bridge,  
Into a village,  
Are twenty men crossing twenty bridges,  
Into twenty villages,  
Or one man  
Crossing a single bridge into a village.

This is old song  
That will not declare itself...

Twenty men crossing a bridge,  
Into a village,  
Are  
Twenty men crossing a bridge  
Into a village.

That will not declare itself  
Yet is certain as meaning...

The boots of the men clump  
On the boards of the bridge.  
The first white wall of the village  
Rises through the fruit-trees.  
Of what was it I was thinking?

So the meaning escapes.

---

<sup>27</sup> "Magnifico" refers to a wealthy or important person.

The first white wall of the village...  
The fruit-trees...

16. Gubbinal<sup>28</sup>  
(poem 62 in the second edition)

That strange flower, the sun,  
Is just what you say.  
Have it your way.

The world is ugly,  
And the people are sad.

That tuft of jungle feathers,  
That animal eye,  
Is just what you say.

That savage of fire,  
That seed,  
Have it your way.

The world is ugly,  
And the people are sad.

17. Domination of Black  
(poem 7 in the second edition)

At night, by the fire,  
The colors of the bushes  
And of the fallen leaves,  
Repeating themselves,  
Turned in the room,  
Like the leaves themselves  
Turning in the wind.  
Yes: but the color of the heavy hemlocks  
Came striding.  
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.

The colors of their tails  
Were like the leaves themselves  
Turning in the wind,  
In the twilight wind.

---

<sup>28</sup> "Gubbinal" is not a real word.

They swept over the room,  
 Just as they flew from the boughs of the hemlocks  
 Down to the ground.  
 I heard them cry- the peacocks.  
 Was it a cry against the twilight  
 Or against the leaves themselves  
 Turning in the wind,  
 Turning as the flames  
 Turned in the fire,  
 Turning as the tails of the peacocks  
 Turned in the loud fire,  
 Loud as the hemlocks  
 Full of the cry of the peacocks?  
 Or was it a cry against the hemlocks?

Out of the window,  
 I saw how the planets gathered  
 Like the leaves themselves  
 Turning in the wind.  
 I saw how the night came,  
 Came striding like the color of the heavy hemlocks.  
 I felt afraid.  
 And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.

18. Earthy Anecdote  
 (poem 1 in the second edition)

Every time the bucks went clattering  
 Over Oklahoma  
 A firecat bristled in the way.

Wherever they went,  
 They went clattering,  
 Until they swerved  
 In a swift, circular line  
 To the right,  
 Because of the firecat.

Or until they swerved  
 In a swift, circular line  
 To the left,  
 Because of the firecat.

The bucks clattered.  
 The firecat went leaping,  
 To the right, to the left,

And  
Bristled in the way.

Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes  
And slept.

19. Of the Surface of Things  
(poem 34 in the second edition)

I.  
In my room, the world is beyond my understanding;  
But when I walk I see that it consists of three or four hills and a cloud.

II.  
From my balcony, I survey the yellow air,  
Reading where I have written,  
“The spring is like a belle undressing.”

III.  
The gold tree is blue.  
The singer has pulled his cloak over his head.  
The moon is in the folds of the cloak.

20. Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird  
(poem 68 in the second edition)

I.  
Among twenty snowy mountains,  
The only moving thing  
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II.  
I was of three minds,  
Like a tree  
In which there are three blackbirds.

III.  
The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.  
It was a small part of the pantomime.

VII.  
O thin men of Haddam,<sup>29</sup>  
Why do you imagine golden birds?  
Do you not see how the blackbird  
Walks around the feet  
Of the women about you?

VIII.  
I know noble accents  
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;  
But I know, too,  
That the blackbird is involved  
In what I know.

IX.

---

<sup>29</sup> Haddam is a town on the Connecticut river about 30 miles from Stevens' home in New Haven.



IV.  
A man and a woman  
Are one.  
A man and a woman and a blackbird  
Are one.

V.  
I do not know which to prefer,  
The beauty of inflections  
Or the beauty of innuendoes,  
The blackbird whistling  
Or just after.

VI.  
Icicles filled the long window  
With barbaric glass.  
The shadow of the blackbird  
Crossed it, to and fro.  
The mood  
Traced in the shadow  
An indecipherable cause.

When the blackbird flew out of sight,  
It marked the edge  
Of one of many circles.

X.  
At the sight of blackbirds  
Flying in a green light,  
Even the bawds of euphony<sup>30</sup>  
Would cry out sharply.

XI.  
He rode over Connecticut  
In a glass coach.  
Once, a fear pierced him, in that he  
mistook  
The shadow of his equipage  
For blackbirds.

XII.  
The river is moving.  
The blackbird must be flying

XIII.  
It was evening all afternoon.  
It was snowing  
And it was going to snow.  
The blackbird sat  
In the cedar-limbs.

### **Dust of Snow (Robert Frost)**

The way a crow  
Shook down on me  
The dust of snow  
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart  
A change of mood  
And saved some part  
Of a day I had rued.

---

<sup>30</sup> “Bawds of euphony” is a complex mixed metaphor. A bawd is a promoter for a brothel; euphony is a pleasant, inoffensive sound. Together, they refer to artists who smooth the sharp points of reality to please a paying audience.

### **The Rose Family (Robert Frost)**

The rose is a rose,  
 And was always a rose.  
 But the theory now goes  
 That the apple's a rose,  
 And the pear is, and so's  
 The plum, I suppose.  
 The dear only knows  
 What will next prove a rose.  
 You, of course, are a rose –  
 But were always a rose.

### **Firelight and Lamp (Gene Baro)**

Now we have shut the door against the cold,  
 Shot home the bolt, drawn the curtains tight,  
 Puffed on the kindling till the flame took hold,  
 We are prepared to know the winter night.

Outdoors, the ranting wind is in a rage,  
 The shutters cry, the branches rap and creak;  
 We lift our heads from fire-gazing or the page;  
 Our eyes meet; we have no need to speak.

Quickly, the hearth is warmed, iron and stone,  
 The fire has gone to embers from a spark.  
 The lamps we've lit, we'll snuff them, one by one,  
 And climb the stairs to winter and the dark.

### **The Little Black Boy (William Blake)**

My mother taught me underneath a tree  
 And, sitting down before the heat of day,  
 She took me on her lap and kissed me,  
 And pointing to the east began to say,

Look on the rising sun: there God does live  
 And gives his light, and gives his heat away.  
 And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive  
 Comfort in morning, joy in the noonday.

And we are put on earth a little space,  
 That we may learn to bear the beams of love,  
 And these black bodies and this sun-burnt face

Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.

For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear  
The cloud will vanish, we shall hear his voice  
Saying: come out from the grove my love & care,  
And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.

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